

‘Palestinians have no leaders; only representatives’

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Palestine. That’s the word that comes to mind to describe the eventful life and times of Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi. Born in 1944 in Nablus at the height of the Palestinian displacement or Nakba (catastrophe) as they call it, like many of his generation, Dr Abdul Hadi’s life has run parallel to and epitomises his people’s relentless struggle for freedom and identity.

His own quest for self-expression, fulfilment and career choices have closely been interwoven with the struggle of the Palestinian people to find their own voice and dignity. A PhD from the UK’s Bradford University and a fellow of the prestigious Harvard University, Dr Abdul Hadi has devoted his entire life to the cause of Palestine

and promoting a clear, historical perspective and understanding of the complex issue around the world.

He has spoken and written extensively on the Palestinian sense of loss and homelessness and on finding lasting solution to the long festering Middle East conflict. Having served in key positions in Palestinian territories and Jordan, he co-founded Al-Fajr newspaper with Yousef Nasser in the 1970s and wrote his first book, *The Question of Palestine and Peaceful Solutions*. In 1977, he founded the Arab Thought Forum, a Palestinian think-tank devoted to offering intellectual leadership to Palestinian institutions and people in and outside Palestinian territories.

On his return from Jordan, Dr Abdul Hadi founded the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) in Jerusalem in March 1987. The centre is not just a forum for the free expression and objective research and analysis but has also published over 120 critical studies on diverse subjects and issues and challenges facing the Palestinian people. It also offers the much needed platform for the Palestinian intellectuals and scholars to interact and exchange ideas and views with the outside world, ranging from interfaith dialogue to peace studies to

addressing political issues such as the Jerusalem question.

However, easily the most critical and path-breaking contribution of the PASSIA as well as that of Dr Abdul Hadi so far has been the seminal tome, *100 Years of Palestinian History: A 20th Century Chronology*.

Beginning in 1900, the book revisits the most important century in the Middle East's history—and that of the world – to capture its turning points, highs and lows and watershed episodes like the decision of world powers to carve out a Jewish state, Israel, out of Palestine, the Nakba or the displacement of the Palestinian people, the 1967 war, and all the tragedies and developments in the nation's history in all their complexity and poignancy.

The outcome of years of research, hard work and dedication, the book chronicles the evolution of Palestine and the Palestinian people's journey through the 20th century. Drawing on a vast array of memoirs, archives and rare, historical photographs, the book is a must have for everyone keen to know and get a comprehensive perspective on the world's most important and complex region and what makes it so. Dr Abdul Hadi, who is in Dubai to be part of the event, Al Quds in Dubai, (October 20) and lecture on Jerusalem,

speaks to *Khaleej Times* about his labour of love, the peace process and the Palestinian future. Excerpts from the interview:

Q: Tell me about your book and what made you write it?

One Hundred Years of Palestinian History records events and personalities as they impacted Palestine and the Palestinian people through the course of the 20th Century. The book has been organised into four parallel chronological sequences for each year from 1900 to 1999. The chronological listings thereby first present events that occurred specifically in Jerusalem, then those occurring over the same period elsewhere within Palestine, followed by those occurring in the region and, lastly, global events of significance. A glossary defining terms and names that occur frequently in the text is also included.

Why do you think this book is important and how it relates to the Palestinian people and their struggle for freedom and identity over the past century?

This book is intended as neither addition to nor replacement for this enormous and rich canon, but rather as a wholly different type of book on the Palestinian people, their land and ongoing struggle. Not a historical book in the ordinary sense, *100 Years of Palestinian History* is a chronicle of events within or related to Palestine and the Palestinians as they occurred – whether in Jerusalem, the rest of Palestine, the wider Arab region, or the international context.

Palestine and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are often presented within the timeframe of other histories, the ‘Arab awakening,’ or the Ottoman or British empires. Hence, Palestinian recorded history is frequently forced into distorted patterns, drawing guidance and significance from often misleading sources. Another weakness of such histories is individualism of the narrative. Historical memoirs and correspondences, fascinating as they are, they offer only the smallest and most subjective of windows on the enormity of a people’s history. This illustrated chronicle attempts to make a worthwhile contribution to the preservation of Palestinian history and identity for both the young and the elderly, in the homeland and the Diaspora, and help

them understand their history by recounting the decades of struggle for freedom and justice.

What do you think of the current Palestinian leadership and who do you think better represents the Palestinians and their interests — Fatah or Hamas?

The present crisis of leadership has deepened in the post-Arafat era with the rise of “representatives” and not leaders.

They represent factions, i.e., Hamas and Fateh and the rest of the PLO factions, rather than the people and their cause. This has resulted in the second Nakba for the Palestinian people, dividing them geographically—Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Diaspora --, ideologically—secular vs. religious—and politically—negotiation or resistance—and thus shaking everyone’s identity.

In fact, the ongoing process of Palestinian dispossession unfolds on four layers:

- The first is the *international community’s* complicity in transferring the Jewish question from Europe to Palestine, its continuing

support for Israel, and its failure to enforce international law to protect Palestinian rights.

- The second is the *State of Israel's* relentless colonisation of Palestinian land, endless atrocities against the Palestinians, constant violations of international law and human rights, and its failure to implement the UN Resolution 194 on the return of refugees as well as its violation of all agreements with the Palestinian leadership since Oslo Accords of 1993.

- The third is the *Arab leaders'* political hypocrisy, their cynical use of the Palestinian tragedy as a manipulative tool in local, regional and global politics, and the tangled web of inter-Arab alliances and rivalries that prevents it from meeting their responsibilities towards their Palestinian brothers.

- The fourth is *Palestinian society's* internal conflicts, wavering loyalties according to events and priorities, infiltration and influence by their Arab brothers and foreign actors including Israel, and leadership crisis characterised by a lack of strategy, bitter factional rivalry, and a priority on political survival; and most painfully for Palestinian society,

the current fragmentation of the proud, deep-rooted Palestinian identity.

Today, an ordinary Palestinian cannot have harmony or dynamic chemistry in the four layers of his identity:

- (1) Religion
- (2) Arab nationalism
- (3) Palestinian identity and
- (4) family

What do you think of the current Palestine-Israel peace talks? Do you see any hope for the Palestinians?

The US Administration raised high expectations for a peace settlement, especially after President Obama's Cairo speech on America's relationship with the Muslim world. George Mitchell's subsequent mission could not meet those expectations because of the Israeli refusal to end its settlement enterprise in Palestinian territories, leading the proximity talks to nowhere. Nevertheless the

Palestinian leadership, under intense US pressure, had to accommodate Obama's request for direct talks.

The new US strategy takes into account the lessons of the July 2000 Camp David talks and does not aspire to reach a "historic deal" to end the conflict, but to establish a process under the banner of "negotiations" towards normalisation of Palestinian-Israeli relations as well as Arab-Israeli ties.

This promotes a "regional security scheme", which embraces Israel and the Arabs while isolating Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas.

The result is a strong exclusive American presence in the Middle East with an agenda consisting of three 'baskets': politics, security and economy.

Other players are becoming an extension to this agenda, if not followers, including the EU and the other Quartet members.

On future leadership, ordinary Palestinians are exhausted and tired of empty slogans and rhetoric with no national agenda and consensus. Therefore future election, whether it's local or national, can be a possibility to introduce a new generation of

representatives with a new agenda for the people and their cause.

Some Palestinian writers like Ramzy Baroud have argued that the Palestinian question should not be viewed through the Arab-Muslim prism but as a larger international humanitarian issue? You agree?

It is dangerous to transform the Palestinian-Israeli conflict into a mere religious conflict or an international humanitarian issue. It has been and should continue to be tackled as political national struggle for self-determination, freedom and independence for the Palestinian people on their own soil. For more than 100 years, Palestinian identity did not “melt” in any regional or international pot but succeeded in maintaining and cultivating its roots, culture, history, monuments, and symbols on the Palestinian soil.

Considering the 20th century has been the century of Palestinian dispossession, what are your expectations from this century? Do you see light at the end of the tunnel?

It is true that the current “impasse” is not getting the process for a two-state solution anywhere. The Gaza

Strip is increasingly becoming an “Egyptian problem” cut off as it has become from the rest of Palestine. Jerusalem is turning into a closed city under exclusive Jewish control, totally changing its face and historical character, and over 60 per cent of the West Bank is controlled by the settlers assisted by the Israeli government. All this leaves the Palestinians locked in an Apartheid system, very much similar to that of South Africa. Three possible options lie ahead:

(1) Historical nostalgia for the rise of a leader like the legendary Salah Eddin Ayubi to end hundred years of crusades and invasions of the Holy Land;

(2) The Algerian “model” where a leader in Paris ended 100 years of French colonisation triggering a national revolution with one million martyrs;

(3) Development from an Apartheid system towards a bi-national state with continuous Palestinian bleeding and Israel military ghettos, and no one to heal wounds through establishing some kind of fact-finding Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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